



Commander Jackson M. Tomsy, USN

August 29, 1919 – April 30, 2013

Served during three wars and headed the U.S. Navy's final Sealab venture

By Ben Hellwarth



Commander Jackson Maxwell Tomsy, who enlisted in the U.S. Navy in his teens, served on several ships during World War II, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and in the mid-1960s was put in charge of Sealab III, the Navy's ambitious but ill-fated final experimental sea-floor base, died April 30, 2013. He was 93.

Tomsy was born on Aug. 29, 1919, in San Francisco and raised in the city's West Portal section, just a couple of miles inland from the Pacific. His father, Samuel C. Tomsy, was a businessman who ran a collection agency; his mother, Bertha Ruby Jacobs Tomsy, was a housewife, who was left to raise Jack, his brother and two sisters at the height of the Depression after Samuel died in 1932.

In recent years Jack Tomsy had spent much of his time caring for his wife of 70 years, Ruth Mary Leah, who survives him. Funeral services were held May 6 in Escondido, where the Tomsys had lived for years. A committal service with full military honors immediately followed at nearby Miramar National Cemetery.

Tomsy initially tried to enlist in the Navy at the age of 18, in his hometown of San Francisco, where work was hard to find. It took a year before his name came up on the waiting list but he eagerly joined in 1939 and was soon assigned to the USS Chewink, the first of several submarine rescue and salvage ships on which Tomsy would serve. He got trained as a second-class diver, which meant learning to dive in the Navy's iconic Mark V gear, with its bulbous copper and brass helmet and heavy, rubber-lined canvas suit fed by an umbilical with compressed air.

In 1951 Tomsy became a commissioned officer – a “mustang,” as enlisted sailors who got commissioned without going to the Naval Academy were known. A few years later Tomsy went through a prospective commanding officer's course at the Navy's deep-sea diving school at the Washington Navy Yard, where he

became a first-class diver. Training included making dives in the murky Anacostia River as part of learning the more specialized methods involved in using the “helium hat,” a bulkier version of the Mark V helmet designed to handle the gas mixtures required for deeper dives. After about six months at the dive school, Tomsy became executive officer of the USS Florikan, another submarine rescue vessel. He then went as chief engineer to the USS Sperry, one of the Navy's hulking submarine tenders, ships outfitted to maintain and repair submarines.

By 1962 Tomsy became commander of the submarine rescue ship Chanticleer. Tomsy was tall and imposing, his dark hair swept back, hawklike. His hard-nosed manner and a deep, booming voice helped earn him the nickname “Black Jack,” which Tomsy found both fitting and amusing when he learned about the moniker years later. “Everybody motivates a little bit differently, and I think my best form of motivation was by raising my voice,” he said in 2002. “Why people hang nicknames on people, there's generally a good reason.”

That distinctive voice could be heard on the Chanticleer for about 40 months, until 1965 when Tomsy returned to the Washington Navy Yard as assistant officer in charge of the deep-sea diving school. Within a matter of months he got a call from John Craven, who was then director of the Navy's Deep Submergence Systems Project. Craven, an ebullient and iconoclastic civilian scientist who occupied a special place in the Navy hierarchy, had heard that Commander Tomsy might be the right kind of officer to head the Man-in-the-Sea program, which was under DSSP, and was soon to include Sealab III, the third and most ambitious of the Navy's experimental “habitats” designed to house divers – “aquanauts” – on the seabed.

Tomsy impressed Craven, but Craven wasn't immediately convinced he had found the right man for the job. Tomsy's experience as a line officer was

well suited to acting as on-scene commander of Sealab III. But Craven had to consider whether this mustang who had never gone to college could handle the associated role as project manager of DSSP's Ocean Engineering Branch, which would entail running several major projects related to submarine rescue and salvage operations in addition to gearing up for Sealab III and further tests of saturation diving, then a revolutionary approach to long-duration deep dives pioneered for Sealab.

Tomsy made a case for himself and by 1966 moved to DSSP headquarters in Bethesda, Md., to take the job. It included overseeing the remodeling and expanding of the successful Sealab II habitat, which resembled a railway tank car, into Sealab III at the Hunters Point shipyard in San Francisco. Some \$10 million, about five times as much as was spent in 1965 for Sealab II, was being pumped into Sealab III. Close to 60 aquanauts and support divers, both military and civilian, were being selected to take part during the 300-ton habitat's two-month mission on the sea floor near the northeastern shoreline of Southern California's San Clemente Island.

Tomsy had as his second in command Scott Carpenter, the Mercury astronaut who had led two of the three 10-aquanaut teams during Sealab II, off the coast of La Jolla, Calif. Tomsy also had Capt. George F. Bond, the medical officer considered the father of Sealab, and Bond's indispensable right-hand man, Capt. Walter Mazzone, of the Medical Service Corps. The project hit some snags and was delayed from the original target dates in 1967 to 1969, a few months before the historic moon landing.

Sealab III was successfully lowered by barge crane to the daunting depth of 610 feet, well beyond conventional diving limits, on Feb. 15, 1969, a rain-swept Saturday. But the pressurized lab was leaking badly. A foursome of divers was lowered to the 60-foot-long lab in a cramped pod designed

to function like an elevator. They were to open the lab and stave off the leaking once inside. By the early morning hours of Feb. 17, a combination of human error and technical difficulties led to the death of one of the aquanauts, Berry Cannon, a civilian electronics engineer who had taken part in Sealab II.

Instead of presiding over the Sealab III mission as planned, Tomsy found himself sitting through the hearings of a Navy board of investigation. Tomsy and one other sailor were given punitive letters of admonition – less severe than letters of reprimand or being recommended for trial by court-martial. Tomsy asked to have the letter withdrawn but ultimately dropped the matter, concerned that pursuing it would only demoralize the Man-in-the-Sea program and garner headlines the Navy could do without.

But a sense of redemption came in another form. Tomsy was soon called back to duty, a rarity for retired officers, especially of Commander Tomsy's modest rank. He was to assist with the secret program within the Sealab program he had helped get started. “The projects,” as those in the know called the secret program, involved adapting the saturation diving methods and equipment developed for Sealab so that divers could be dispatched from submarines on spy missions.

Once Tomsy left the Navy for good in mid-1970, he became the North Sea diving manager for J Ray McDermott & Co., a major offshore contractor, and within a few years he stepped in as president and CEO of Hydrospace International, a provider of commercial diving services started by two former Sealab aquanauts.

Tomsy is survived by his wife, whom he fondly called Ruthie; his daughter, Leah Ruth Tomsy; a granddaughter and three great-grandsons. His sons, Charles Anthony and Lawrence Samuel, and daughter Pamela Lorraine Tomsy, predeceased him. 🍀